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United States Department of Agriculture

PRODUCTION AND MARKETING ADMINISTRATION

SERVICE AND REGULATORY ANNOUNCEMENTS NO. 168

OFFICIAL UNITED STATES STANDARDS FOR GRADES OF SLAUGHTER LAMBS, YEARLINGS, AND SHEEP

(Title 7, Ch. I, Pt. 53, Sections 53.130–53.134 of the Code of Federal Regulations)

The following is a reprint of the official United States standards for the grades of slaughter lambs, yearlings, and sheep heretofore promulgated by the Secretary of Agriculture under the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1946 (60 Stat. 1087; 7 U. S. C. 1621 et seq.) and the items for Market Inspection of Farm Products and Marketing Farm Products recurring in the annual appropriation acts for the United States Department of Agriculture.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE STANDARDS

Tentative United States Standards for the Market Classes and Grades of Slaughter Lambs and Sheep were prepared in 1917 to provide a basis on which the Federal Market News Service might issue market quotations on these animals, according to a uniform classification. Preliminary grade descriptions were mimeographed and distributed. Suggestions for their improvement were solicited and received from producers, animal husbandmen, market agencies, and slaughterers. These suggestions were used in further perfecting the standards.

Late in 1926 and early in 1927, public hearings were held in Portland (Oreg.), San Francisco, Salt Lake City, Denver, Fort Worth, Kansas City, Omaha, St. Paul, Chicago, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Invitations to attend these hearings were sent to livestock producers, slaughterers, wholesale and retail dealers, agricultural college workers, and others interested in the livestock and meat industries. The sentiment developed in these hearings was decidedly in favor of the standardized grades for sheep, yearlings, and lambs, as presented. Criticisms and suggestions brought out in the hearings were given careful consideration in later revisions of the tentative standards, which were printed in March 1936, Circular No. 383. The circular was slightly revised in July 1940.

The tentative standards for grades of slaughter sheep were revised and promulgated by the Secretary of Agriculture as the official United States standards for grades of slaughter lambs, yearlings, and sheep, effective April 30, 1951. These standards are now being issued as Service and Regulatory Announcements No. 168. The revisions in the tentative standards, at the time of their promulgation as official standards, combined the Prime and Choice grades and designated them as Prime. The Good grade was renamed Choice, which also became the highest grade for which slaughter sheep older than yearlings are eligible. The top two-thirds of the Medium grade was renamed Good; the lower one-third of the Medium grade was combined with the upper two-thirds of the Common grade and designated as Utility; and the lower one-third of the Common grade was combined with the Cull grade and designated as Cull. The revisions also provided for indicating in the standards the minimum requirements for each grade and specified the grade requirements at varying degrees of maturity.

APPLICATION OF STANDARDS

The official standards for market sheep, developed by the United States Department of Agriculture, provide for segregation according to: (1) Use as slaughter animals or feeders; (2) class or sex condition; (3) age group; and (4) grade, which is determined by the apparent relative excellence and desirability of the individual animal for a particular use.

CLASSES AND MARKET GROUPS

The classes of slaughter sheep are ram, ewe, and wether; the age groups are lambs, yearlings, and sheep. Definitions of the respective classes and age groups are as follows:

RAM.—A ram is an uncastrated male ovine.

EWE.—A ewe is a female ovine.

WETHER.—A male ovine castrated when young and prior to developing the secondary physical characteristics of a ram.

LAMB.—A lamb is an immature ovine, usually under 14 months of age, and has not cut its first pair of permanent teeth.

YEARLING.—A yearling is an ovine between 1 and 2 years of age that has cut its first pair of permanent teeth but has not cut the second pair.

SHEEP.—The term sheep refers to ovines over 24 months of age that have cut their second pair of permanent teeth.

GRADE FACTORS

The specific grade of slaughter lambs and sheep is determined by an evaluation in terms of factors which influence carcass excellence—conformation, finish, and quality.

Conformation refers to the general body proportions of the animal and to the ratio of meat to bone. Although primarily determined by the inherent muscular and skeletal system, it is also influenced by degree of fatness. Excellent conformation in slaughter lambs and sheep is denoted by a compact, wide-topped, straight-lined, thick-fleshed individual that is deep and full in the twist. Fullness and thickness should be especially evident in the portions of the body producing the more desirable cuts of meat—loin, rack, and legs.

Finish refers to the fatness of the animal. The type, quantity, and distribution of finish of the slaughter animal are very closely associated with the palatability and quality of the meat which it will produce. Thus, finish becomes the most important single factor affecting the grade of slaughter lambs and sheep. External finish is evidenced by fullness and the apparent thickness of the fat covering over the back, loin, rump, ribs, and legs. A high degree of desirable finish is evidenced by a thick, firm, smooth layer of fat which is uniformly distributed over the body.

Quality in slaughter lambs and sheep refers largely to the refinement of bone and to the smoothness and symmetry of the body. Quality is also closely associated with carcass yield and the proportion of meat to bone. A high degree of quality in slaughter lambs and sheep is denoted by relatively small bones, neat joints, neatly laid in shoulders and hips, smoothness of fleshing, refined, clean-cut features about the head, and fine hair on face and legs.

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

The determination of the carcass grade that the slaughter animal will produce requires the exercising of well-regulated judgment. Each animal presents a different combination of the grade-determining factors. Animals frequently have characteristics associated with two or more grades. Therefore, a composite evaluation of all the inherent physical characteristics is essential for accuracy in determining grade.

The accurate determination of the grade of a slaughter lamb or sheep requires handling in addition to the visual observations. The length and density of the fleece varies greatly with individuals and the thickness and firmness of the flesh covering of woolled lamb and sheep can only be roughly estimated without handling. The technique used in handling usually varies with the degree of precision in mind as well as the experience of the grader. Experienced graders may find one quick handling satisfactory. This usually consists of placing one open hand over the back and ribs in a simultaneous motion. The thumb extends just over the backbone, while the fingers, which are held close together, cover the rib section and pressure is applied very lightly with a slight lateral and forward and backward motion. The generally accepted technique of handling sheep where time permits, and especially when noting slight differences between individuals, is to handle forward from the dock to the neck with the open hand, fingers together, laid flat and with a slight lateral motion. Both hands may then be used on each side in a similar manner to determine the fleshing over the shoulders, ribs, and hips. Regardless of the method, considerable experience is necessary in handling lambs or sheep to accurately determine the grade.

The market designation of slaughter lambs and sheep is usually made by classes. However, the standards are intended to apply to all classes. The grade descriptions are considered typical of ewes and wethers; it is recognized that rams, which numerically constitute a minor market class, will have somewhat thicker necks, shoulders, and legs than those specified for a given grade.

The descriptions of the physical characteristics of the grades of slaughter lambs and sheep represent the lower limit of each grade. No attempt is made to describe the numerous combinations of grade factors which may meet the minimum requirements for a particular grade. Descriptions are limited largely to animals considered as typical of the lower limits of the grade.

SPECIFICATIONS FOR OFFICIAL UNITED STATES STANDARDS FOR GRADES OF SLAUGHTER LAMBS

PRIME

Lambs possessing the minimum requirements for Prime grade tend to be lowset, compact, thickly fleshed, and short of neck. They tend to be wide over the back, loin, and rump. Shoulders and hips are moderately neat and smoothly laid in. The twist is deep and full, and the legs are large and plump. There is a slight fullness or plumpness evident over the crops, loin, and rump which contributes to a well-rounded appearance. Relatively young lambs, under 7 months of age, tend to have a slightly thick fat covering over the back, ribs, loin, and rump. In handling, the backbone and ribs are slightly discernible. Older, more mature lambs have a moderately thick fat covering over the back, loin, and rump. In handling, the backbone and ribs are not readily discernible. Prime lambs exhibit evidences of high quality. The bones tend to be proportionately small, joints smooth, the finish evenly distributed, and the body trim, smooth, and symmetrical.

CHOICE

Lambs possessing the minimum requirements for Choice grade are slightly compact, thick-fleshed, and slightly short of neck. They are slightly wide over the back, loin, and rump. The shoulders and hips are usually moderately neat and smoothly laid in but may exhibit a slight tendency toward prominence. The twist is slightly deep and full, and the legs slightly thick and plump. Relatively young lambs, under 7 months of age, have a moderately thin fat covering over the back, ribs, loin, and rump. In handling, the backbone and ribs are slightly prominent. Older, more mature lambs tend to have a slightly thick fat covering over the back, ribs, loin, and rump. In handling, the backbone and ribs are slightly discernible. Choice lambs usually present a moderately refined appearance.

GOOD

Lambs possessing the minimum requirements for Good grade are moderately rangy, upstanding, long and thin of neck, and moderately thin-fleshed. They are slightly narrow over the back, loin, and rump. Hips and shoulders are moderately prominent. The twist is slightly shallow and the legs slightly small and thin. Relatively young lambs, under 7 months of age, have a very thin, uneven fat covering over the back, loin, and upper ribs. In handling, the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are prominent. Older, more mature lambs have a thin fat covering over the back, ribs, and loin. In handling, the bones of the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are rather prominent. Lambs of this grade may present evidences of slightly low quality. The bones and joints are usually moderately large, and the body somewhat lacking in symmetry and smoothness.

UTILITY

Lambs meeting the minimum requirements for Utility grade are very rangy, angular, and long and thin of neck. They are very thinly fleshed, narrow over the back, loin, and rump and shallow in the twist. The hips are very prominent and the shoulders are usually open, rough, and prominent. The legs are very small, thin, and present a slightly concave appearance. Regardless of age, Utility lambs show no visible evidence of fat covering. In handling, bones of the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are very prominent. Utility grade lambs are of rather low quality. The bones and joints are proportionately large and the body is very rough and unsymmetrical.

CULL

Typical Cull grade lambs are extremely rangy, angular, long and thin of neck, thin-fleshed, and extremely narrow and shallow bodied. Shoulders and hips are very prominent. The legs are extremely small, thin, and present a very concave appearance. In handling, the bones of the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are extremely prominent and the entire bony framework is very evident. The

general appearance is that of low quality. The relative proportion of meat to bone is quite low, joints appear large, and the body is very unsymmetrical.

SPECIFICATIONS FOR OFFICIAL UNITED STATES STANDARDS FOR GRADES OF SLAUGHTER YEARLINGS AND SHEEP

PRIME

Slaughter sheep beyond the yearling stage are not eligible for the Prime grade. Yearling sheep possessing the minimum requirements for Prime grade are lowset, compact, thickly fleshed, and short of neck. They are wide over the back, loin, and rump. Shoulders and hips are moderately neat and smoothly laid in. The twist is deep and full, and the legs are large and plump. There is a distinct fullness or plumpness evident over the crops, loins, and rump which contributes to a well-rounded appearance. There is a thick but very smooth fat covering over the back, ribs, loin, and rump, and, in handling, the backbone and ribs are not discernible. Prime slaughter sheep exhibit evidences of high quality. The bones tend to be proportionately small, joints smooth, the finish evenly distributed, and the body trim, smooth, and symmetrical.

CHOICE

Slaughter sheep possessing the minimum requirements for Choice grade are moderately compact, thickly fleshed, and short of neck. They are moderately wide over the back, loin, and rump. The shoulders and hips are usually moderately neat and smoothly laid in but may show a slight tendency toward prominence. The twist is moderately deep and full, and the legs rather thick and plump. Yearling sheep have a slightly thick fat covering over the back, ribs, loin, and rump and, in handling, the backbone and ribs are only slightly discernible. Mature sheep have a moderately thick but very smooth fat covering over the back, ribs, loin, and rump, and, in handling, the backbone and ribs are hardly discernible. Choice slaughter sheep usually present a moderately refined appearance.

GOOD

Slaughter sheep possessing the minimum requirements for Good grade are slightly rangy, upstanding, long and thin of neck, and slightly thin-fleshed. They are slightly narrow over the back, loin, and rump. Hips and shoulders are moderately prominent. The twist is slightly shallow and the legs slightly small and thin. Yearling sheep tend to have a thin fat covering over the back, loin, and upper ribs. In handling, the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are rather prominent. Mature sheep have a moderately thin fat covering over the back, ribs, and loin. In handling, the bones of the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are slightly prominent. Sheep of this grade may present evidences of slightly low quality. The bones and joints are usually moderately large, and the body somewhat lacking in symmetry and smoothness.

UTILITY

Slaughter sheep meeting the minimum requirements for Utility grade are very rangy, angular, and long and thin of neck. They are very thinly fleshed, narrow over the back, loin, and rump, and shallow in the twist. The hips are very prominent and the shoulders are usually open, rough, and prominent. The legs are very small, thin, and present a slightly concave appearance. Regardless of age, Utility grade slaughter sheep show no visible evidences of fat covering. In handling, the bones of the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are so thinly covered that they are very prominent. Utility grade slaughter sheep are of rather low quality. The bones and joints are proportionately large and the body is very rough and unsymmetrical.

CULL

Typical Cull grade sheep are extremely rangy, angular, long and thin of neck, thin-fleshed, and extremely narrow and shallow bodied. Shoulders and hips are very prominent. The legs are extremely small, thin, and present a very concave appearance. In handling, the bones of the shoulders, backbone, hips, and ribs are extremely prominent and the entire bony framework is very evident. The general appearance is that of low quality. The relative proportion of meat to bone is quite low, joints appear large, and the body is very unsymmetrical.